

Choices about Feminism and Religion

Asma and Taylor

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An anthropologist named Celia McMichael conducted some incredibly powerful research with Somali refugee women in Melbourne, Australia in which she asked them about the role religion played in their lives. Their narratives, she writes, “were not a tool that I used to produce an account of the *truth* of women’s experience [...] Rather, the interviews were a chance to explore how women ascribe meaning and order to their lives” (2002: 176).

What she found speaks to Asma’s own relationship with her faith as a refugee woman. The following quote from McMichael’s article really encapsulates the role Islam played in her narrators’ lives:

As refugees, these women were displaced from familiar life-worlds in Somalia. Yet Islam provides an enduring ‘home’ that is carried throughout displacement and resettlement. Islam is articulated through women’s use and construction of space, daily practices, forms of interactions, and modes of thinking about their lives. Further, Islam offers a meaningful framework of practice and ideology that sustains women during the hardships of exile, displacement and resettlement and in times of emotional distress. (171)

As Asma shared her life with me in our conversations, she often described how she would pray whenever she was feeling particularly lonely, sad, frustrated, or ashamed. In a time when her entire world was shifting around her and she was alone in all of those massive changes, Asma’s faith grounded her in the moment and gave her the confidence to carry on. YES

A: I prayed—I used to pray a lot.

T: Yeah.

A: I used to read the Holy Qur'an a lot, to save me.

[fade]

A: Yeah, it was very, very hard. I used to pray a lot. I used to pray in the middle of night, three o’clock, two o’clock, and I pray, and I ask God, like, “God, please don’t let me here, don’t let me here. I cannot find a great job to support myself. [baby Halima cooing] My mom and my sisters are there. I’m the only one who, who be, be the helper. Please don’t put me down.... I mean... give me a better life.” And He give it to me.

T: Yeah.

A: And I change my family life, I change it, I totally—I mean, until now, I send the bill for my mom.

These two quotes really speak to Asma’s reliance on her faith as a support system throughout uncertain times in her life. In fact, she says it “saved” her.

She also describes how praying and reading the Qur'an is a kind of purifying act for her, as well. In the wake of her first heartbreak, she prayed to let go of the hatred and anger she felt towards men and to ask for forgiveness for her own actions. Whenever she feels herself slipping into a YES
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place she doesn't like, she prays to return to herself. This selection from our conversation about her commitment to her faith while living in Syria reflects this purifying sentiment when she describes herself as "clean" when she prays:

A: Yeah, I felt free. I used to pray a lot. I used to wake up in the middle of the night, three o'clock, four o'clock...

T: And pray?

A: In the morning, and pray and read the Qur'an until the sunshine come. Now I don't have all that time to be a, a, make a... I mean I was trying to, to be worshipping of my God.

T: Mhm.

Very busy mom

A: But now I, I become less—not that much.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. But I'm still not doing something bad, but I, I become less.

T: Do you wish you could do it more?

A: Yes.

T: Yeah?

A: Yes. Yes. I will. I will, but—

T: There's a lot on your plate right now.

A: Yeah, let—[laughs] let my kids grow up a little bit...

T: Yeah, yeah, and finish college!

A: [Laughing] Yeah, yeah, get have a time myself? Yeah, I will do it, I will do it. The most thing I like, when you see me my face is happy more, when I have a worship for God more.

yes

T: That's when you're happiest?

A: Yes. I feel like, ah, I am...clean, I don't have nothing, any problem, I don't worry about anything. As much I pray, I feel as much I'm happy. Yeah.

Asma's faith is therefore a crucial part of her identity, one which she uses as a source of stability and empowerment. It is also one that she feels she has lost since becoming a mother. Though she still prays, Asma says that she has lost a part of her personality in these busy years, and part of that personality is her commitment to prayer and study of the Qur'an.

my
religion
religion

I learn

from
quran
how
to be
better

person

However, her ideas about Islam are also remarkably open-minded. She wants her children to be able to choose what faith they practice, and explains to me in one of our earlier conversations that "all the religions are right."

yes

A: But I am trying to... My kids have... Already know different cultures where their parents have come from.

T: Right.

A: But they have... many choice, they can practice any religion they want when they grow up.

T: Yeah [writing]

A: But my job is to let them—what my parents teach me, I'm gonna let them... teach them.

T: Right.

A: So they have a choice when they grow up.

T: So... So you're... Muslim, you practice Islam, right?

A: Yes.

T: So you don't feel like it's necessary for your kids to be Muslim?

A: Ummm... I-I feel it's, it's important. *yes very important*

T: Yeah.

A: I feel it's important to learn my kids, on my religion.

T: Yeah.

A: Because that's what I believe.

T: Yeah.

A: Because if I didn't believe, I would quit.

T: Right.

A: But it's—I will...

T: But if you believe it, you should share it with them.

A: Exactly. I believe I should share it with my kids, but I only think to tell my kids... even if they are born in Somalia, even if they are born in other different countries.... The way I, I learn the religion. I choose, my, my family chose Muslim.

T: Yeah.

A: So I am Muslim, too, But... But my family teach me all the religions are right.

McMichael writes that “through self-reflection and imagination, women elide, negotiate, embrace, and reformulate the expectations and offerings of Islam,” and Asma enacts these practices not only in regards to her personal faith, but how she wants to encourage it in her children (184).

However, Asma only felt comfortable re-imagining her faith *after* she left Somalia. In their article on Somali families living in the U.S., Boyle and Ali write about this tension between the recent rise in conservatism in Somalia and the far more socially liberal culture of the United States. This results in “greater gender equality” in married couples, according to Boyle and Ali (2010: 14). They also write that “The conservatism may dilute the American influence or it may cause Somali women to be conservative in some ways (e.g., wearing the hijab) but more liberal in others (e.g., views on men doing household labour)” (67). This is precisely true in Asma’s household, as she covers, but her husband also helps her around the house when he is home.

Women in particular experience far more choice about how they live their lives, and both Boyle and Ali and Connor and colleagues discovered that Somali women experienced more freedom and opportunities for employment and education. Asma herself told me about friends in Kentucky who dated far more freely and decided for themselves about whether or not they wanted to cover.

A: You know, if you wanna practical, being tight for your religion... You can follow everything say the religion.

T: Right.

A: But it's, it's about the choice your personality. You can be a Christian, not follow, you can be a Muslim, not follow. Some girls, they don't put cover. You see it, I think, I think you see it, some, some...

T: Yeah, I have some friends...

A: Yeah. Arabic girl, they don't cover. Muslim person, but they don't like to cover.

T: Yeah.

A: They wearing, uh, jeans like you, they're wearing like you, some they're wearing naked, bikini everything they wanna do it...

T: Right.

A: But they're still calling theirself a Muslim.

T: Okay.

A: If you ask them. It's about the a choice.

T: Would you say that...is a choice you could make in Somalia, or would you say that is a choice you could only make...

A: After. Yeah.

T: So you have to leave? To make that choice.

Yes - it is about you

A: Outside.

T: Okay.

A: Yeah. Most our, our families, most, I say like eighty-five percent, maybe ninety percent, um, they grow up with the religion.

[fade]

A: If you go to Somalia now, most people are covering.

T: Most people are covering?

A: Yeah, are covering. Sometime you can see only the eyes.

T: Right, the, the full-body cover?

A: Yeah, the full-body cover. That's most. But after they out the country, they have a choice. It depends about the family, depends about the personality, boy and girl, they have a choice to do whatever they wanted. But the family are not happy their kids change. But sometime they don't have a choice to do anything.

T: Right.

These choices, then, are only possible once someone leaves the country. Standing on her own for the first time, Asma has felt empowered to seek her own education and aspires to hold a career that her children can be proud of and want to pursue themselves. She and her husband—though still committed to preserving their Somali culture—are working in a more egalitarian relationship, as she plans to return to work after her schooling is done so that he can finish his own degree and attain a job so that he can spend more time at home. *yes*

This cultural awareness, then, has presented new tensions and opportunities that juxtapose some of the ideas they grew up with, but Asma and her husband are making a life of their own in the United States, and that requires choosing which elements of each culture they will adopt as they raise their family. *yes*